

## **From Segregation to Inclusion: Perceptual Developments and Their Implementation in the Education of Special Needs Students in Israel**

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Over the past four decades, Israel's educational system has gradually shifted from segregating students with special needs (SwSNs) to including them in general education. This process reflects a humanistic approach that promotes inclusion alongside tailored support. To meet SwSNs' diverse needs, the Israeli educational system has developed a continuum of frameworks, providing students with services in the most suitable settings. The present article examines Israel's evolving special education approaches and policies for continually balancing the rights of SwSNs with the principle of equality in education. Key phases in this process are the enacting of the Special Education Laws (1988; 2002), the establishment of national committees, and the State Comptroller Reports for the examination of the Laws implementation, and the 2018 "Eleventh Amendment" to the Special Education law, which aimed to enhance inclusion through the "Parents' Choice" model and the "Funding Follows the Child" principle. The 2018 reform faced setbacks due to limited resources, and inadequate teacher training, leading parents to prefer specialized-separated education. These days, the appointed Shapira Committee is re-evaluating the education of SwSNs in Israel's educational system. Despite progress, challenges in achieving true inclusion persist due to structural and budgetary constraints and differing perspectives between general and special education sectors.

*Keywords:* special education in Israel, students with special needs, inclusion, continuum of special education frameworks

### **Introduction**

For nearly four decades, the Israeli educational system has been dedicated to implementing an approach called "the Continuum from Segregation to Inclusion" for students with special needs (SwSNs). This approach aims to integrate SwSNs into regular classes in general schools while simultaneously providing various educational frameworks to address the diverse needs of SwSNs. It reflects Israel's increasing commitment to ensuring equal opportunities for all students, regardless of ability, intending to foster a sense of belonging and support. This article reviews and analyses the evolution of ideological approaches within Israel's special education system from the establishment of the state (1948) to the present, focusing on the development of inclusion as a response to the needs of students with disabilities. It explores how the continuum of educational frameworks reflects changing perspectives on special education, highlighting Israel's ongoing efforts to balance inclusive practices with individualized support. The review examines the transition from a segregated approach to an inclusive one, as expressed in legislation, policymaking,

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implementation by educators, and the experiences of students and parents. Additionally, the review explores emerging trends in the attitudes toward the education and inclusion of SwSNs and the factors that have either promoted or hindered the implementation of inclusive education in Israel over time.

To address these issues, the review will draw on various information sources, including professional literature, research studies, legislation, State Comptroller reports, reviews from the Research and Information Center of the Israeli Parliament, national committee reports, the Ministry of Education's General Administration Circulars, policy papers, and official data published by the Ministry of Education.

### **From Segregation to Inclusion**

Following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, education played a pivotal role in the nation-building process. Laws were enacted, regulating the education system, including the Compulsory State Education Law (1949), which stipulated that every child between the ages of 5 and 18 is entitled to free education, regardless of their personal needs or difficulties. During this period, policies for educating SwSNs were formulated. Until the 1970s, the dominant belief was that separate special education frameworks were more effective than inclusive in general education settings for SwSNs (Avisar & Bab, 2010; Ronen, 2007). This belief led to a significant expansion of special education schools in Israel (Ronen, 2007). In this period, students were categorized based on their disabilities. They were defined at that time as "handicapped," "impaired," and "exceptional children", terms that emphasized differences and abnormality (Al-Yangon & Margalit, 2001). This approach influenced educational perspectives and treatment. Teaching methods often relied on slow-paced instruction and extensive use of visual aids, although these techniques frequently failed to provide age-appropriate content (Marom, Bar-Simon Tov, Kron, & Koren, 2006; Reiter, 2007; Ronen, 2007). The guiding principle during this time was separation, which resulted in a segregated special education system operating independently from the general education system (Marom, Bar-Simon Tov, Kron, & Koren, 2006). Criticism of the segregation approach began to emerge in the 1970s, fueled by the rise of the "normalization" movement, which emphasized the right of every individual to live a life as close to societal norms as possible (Reiter, 2007). Advocates of this movement argued that people with disabilities should have the opportunity to live, learn, and work in environments like those of individuals without disabilities, challenging both their marginalization and the negative perceptions often associated with them (Nirje, 1985).

Inspired by the normalization movement, Israel, like many Western countries, experienced in the 1990s the emergence of an inclusion movement grounded in humanistic philosophy. This movement emphasizes that SwSN is equal in his rights to the student who is not disabled (Marom, Bar-Simon Tov, Kron, & Koren, 2006). The labeling definition previously given to students with disabilities has changed, defining them as "students with special needs". This definition, used in Israel and many other countries, reflects the need for a dynamic approach to the student's functioning and needs (Al-Yagon & Margalit, 2001). While the normalization

movement highlighted “The Right to Equality,” which means the right to be like everyone else, the inclusion movement emphasized “The Right to Equity,” which calls for the right to be different. This perspective is rooted in the belief that all individuals exist on a diverse continuum (Avisar, 2010; Marom, Bar-Simon Tov, Kron, & Koren, 2006), with an inherent right to belonging, self-expression, and equal opportunities. The goal of the inclusion movement was to transform equality from a theoretical concept into a tangible, lively reality. Consequently, the principle of inclusive education gained traction, advocating for the right of SwSNs to learn alongside their same-age peers in general educational settings (Avisar, 2010; Marom, Bar-Simon Tov, Kron, & Koren, 2006). Proponents of inclusion argued that this would bring about two significant benefits: fostering the acceptance and integration of SwSNs into society and raising awareness and acceptance among 'regular' students of the diverse needs within their community (Harpaz, 2013). A key landmark in this movement was the 1994 Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), which declared during an international conference in Spain that general schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society, and achieving education for all. Furthermore, they provide effective education for most children and improve the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the entire education system (UNESCO, 1994, p. 9).

Since the 1990s, Israel's educational system has expanded its approach to inclusion, recognizing the differences among SwSNs as natural. This shift is guided by the evolving “Quality of Life” concept which emphasizes that inclusion must go beyond mere integration, ensuring that the environment allows individuals to express their values, aspirations, and personal choices while meeting their specific needs (Avisar, 2010; Reiter, 2007; Ronen, 2007; Schalock, 2005). Research studies on inclusion in Israel reveal similar findings to those in other countries. According to the studies, general education teachers in Israel generally hold positive views on inclusion. However, they also express concerns and challenges and emphasize the difficulties in SwSNs' inclusion in regular classes - the need for adjustments of the educational environment to support inclusion, such as allocating time for collaboration with all the staff and the parents, creating flexible schedules, providing adequate resources and funding for SwSNs, making physical adjustments in the learning environment, and ensuring that the number of SwSNs in a classroom is manageable to facilitate successful integration (e.g., Avisar, 2002; Avisar, Reiter, & Leyser, 2003; Gavish & Shimoni, 2006; Reiter, Schanin, & Tirosh, 1998; Shechtman, Reiter, & Schanin, 1993).

Moreover, including students in regular classes constitutes a challenge in the daily reality of schools in Israel, which are based on achievements and excellence in their studies and are less prepared professionally to handle students with difficulties (Marom, Bar-Simon Tov, Kron, & Koren, 2006; Reiter, 2007). This trend strengthened with the rise of the standards movement, which measures the quality and achievements of schools based on national and international exams that introduced an element of competitiveness into learning (Tamir, 2011). At the same time, it has left behind SwSNs, whose progress is not measured or valued by comparative standards, but rather against their individual growth. The increasing emphasis on a standards-based

approach inevitably limits inclusive practices, such as adapting the pace of instruction for integrated students and providing necessary accommodations, out of concern that such practices may slow overall classroom progress and compromise the high achievement levels that schools aim to uphold and are required to maintain.

### **The “Least Restrictive Environment” as Part of the Inclusion Perception**

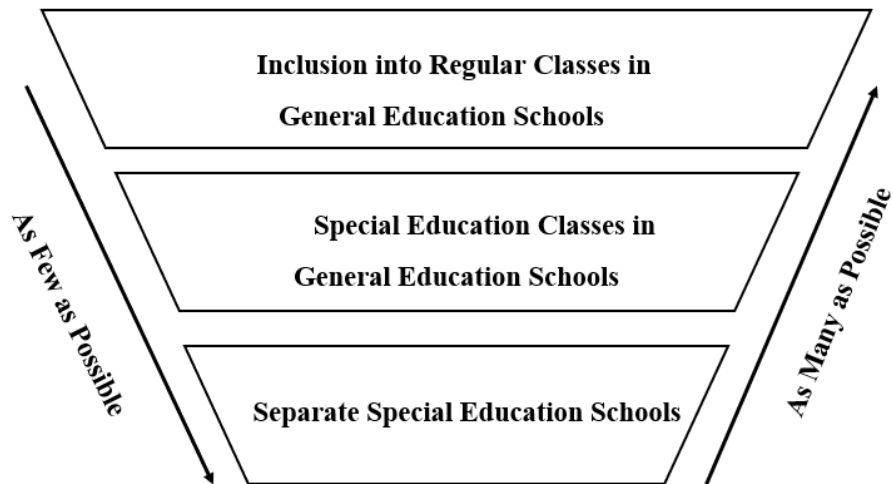
Simultaneously to the shift toward greater inclusion since the 1990s, Israel’s educational system has developed specialized and more segregated frameworks to provide the comprehensive services necessary for students with complex and severe disabilities (Blass, 2022; Weissblai, 2020). Israel adopted the “Least Restrictive Environment” principle, advocating for a continuum of educational settings that minimize the limitations on a student’s development, quality of life, and ability to achieve education goals (Avissar, 2010; Avissar, Moshe, & Licht, 2013; Crockett & Kauffman, 1999; Howard, 2004; Ronen, 2007). This dynamic approach focuses on flexibility and the potential for movement and transition between existing frameworks to ensure appropriate solutions that meet the diverse needs of SwSNs (Ronen, 2005).

The continuum of educational frameworks in Israel includes three main types, ranked by their degree of separation from general education: (1) special education schools tailored to specific complex or severe disabilities; (2) special classes within general schools according to specific mild disabilities. These classes aim to provide SwSNs with three key benefits: a tailored, specialized learning environment, the opportunity to remain within a general school setting, and the provision of support that will foster integration with their peer group in various ways; and (3) the inclusion framework in regular classes within general schools. The types of disabilities of SwSNs studying in the three types of frameworks in Israel are: Learning disabilities; attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); behavioral disorder; emotional disorder; speech delay; developmental delay; mental disorders; ASD – autism spectrum disorder in low or high functioning; borderline intelligence; mild, moderate, and severe developmental intellectual disability; physical disabilities; visual impairment; hearing impairment; rare diseases and syndromes (Special Education Law, 2018). A review submitted to the Israeli Parliament Committee on Child Rights indicates that learning disabilities are the most common disability among all SwSNs across the three mentioned educational frameworks (50%), then the developmental and speech delays (18%) and behavioral and mental disorders (14%) (Monnikendam-Givon, 2019).

In the 2022/2023 school year, 2,503,873 students were enrolled in the Israeli education system. Among them, 122,817 SwSNs (41%) attended separate frameworks, including special education schools and special classes within general schools. 178,099 SwSNs (59%) were integrated into regular classes in general schools (Goldin, 2023). The percentage of SwSNs studying in the Israeli education system is 12%. The guiding principle in placement in one of the three types of frameworks is choosing the environment that least restricts the child's development, only moving to more specialized settings if the severity of the disability makes effective education in a general framework unattainable, even with available

support. Nevertheless, the inclusion policy in Israel, enshrined in the Special Education Laws (1988; 2002; 2018), aims to reduce the number of SwSNs attending separate frameworks and increase the number of SwSNs in more inclusive settings, as illustrated in Figure 1.

*Figure 1.* The Continuum of Educational Frameworks for Special Needs Students in Israel



However, data presented in a study conducted by Weisblai (2023) from the Research and Information Center of the Israeli Parliament indicate that while the number of students eligible for special education services has been steadily increasing, the proportion of integrated students within the total special education population has remained almost unchanged for a decade, standing at approximately 60%. The analysis of data and trends over time raises concerns that, in the long run, most SwSNs will study in separate frameworks, contradicting the Ministry of Education's policy and the principles of the law, which advocate for the preference of integrating students with special needs into regular educational settings (Goldin, 2023).

Inclusion is a fundamental principle across all three frameworks in Israel's education system. Each student diagnosed and classified as having special needs (SwSN) is required to have an individualized educational plan (IEP) tailored to their specific needs (Special Education Law, 1988, section 19) to promote personal support, community engagement from a young age, and the development of autonomy (Igel & Malichi, 2007; Shavit & Tal, 2013). The individualized educational plans are based on the general education curricula and adjusted to meet the students' functional levels (Avissar, 2010). They aligned with the "Quality of Life" principle and addressed the accommodations, modifications, and alternatives that enable SwSN access to the curricula and meaningful participation. For students in special education schools whose cognitive abilities differ significantly from the norm, comprehensive adjustments and alternatives are implemented relative to their peers (Tal & Leshem, 2007). The study plan for special education classes within general schools aligns with the age group curriculum in the school to reduce achievement gaps between special education class students and their peers in regular classes (Igel & Malichi, 2007). This approach also facilitates the integration of SwSNs into

general education classes for certain subjects, where appropriate (Bar, 2022). All the special education frameworks in Israel operate through a collaborative approach, involving an interdisciplinary team of professionals with expertise in various fields, providing support for the diverse needs of students (Manor-Binyamini, 2009; Igel & Malichi, 2007; Ronen, 2005).

In both special education schools and special classes within general schools, students are taught in small groups by teachers trained in special education. The teachers tailor their teaching methods, materials, assessment strategies, and the overall learning environment to meet the unique needs of each student. Special education schools provide extended study hours, classes during official vacations, and access to specialized teachers with diverse expertise, including paramedical professionals, emotional therapists, and other specialists (Special Education Law, 1988; Weissblai, 2020). These extended services highlight a contradiction: while the policy prioritizes integrating students into general education over special education, special education schools provide services that are not fully available in general education settings. This tension is frequently discussed in public forums in Israel. In the inclusion framework within general schools, a committee led by the principal oversees decisions regarding student inclusion. Based on these discussions, students are granted various forms of support, including individualized or group instruction from staff trained in special education, alongside access to paramedical services and emotional therapies (Special Education Law, 2002).

The Special Education Law enactment in 1988 and the implementation of the “Least Restrictive Environment” principle marked a turning point in the work of special education teachers in Israel - two distinct professional paths emerged, differing in perspective, work environment, and teaching methods: resource teacher for SwSNs integrated into general education classes, who serve as expert consultants to the professional staff on learning and behavior issues; and special education teachers working within special education classes in general schools and within special education schools (Gavish & Friedman, 2000). The responsibilities of the special education teachers in both professional tracks are extensive. They work with students with diverse and complex disabilities, design individualized education plans, are familiar with the general education curriculum and adapt it to students' needs, and adjust teaching methods, learning materials, assessment tools, and learning environments to the students' changing needs. Additionally, their roles involve substantial paperwork and require close collaboration with various stakeholders, including school administration, teachers, multidisciplinary teams, parents, and external agencies (Bar, 2022). A similar picture regarding the challenging roles of the special education teacher, along with the challenges that arise in their work, emerges from research literature worldwide (e.g., Billingsley, 2004a; Billingsley, 2004b; Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009; Feiman-Nemser, 2003; Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002; Griffin, Winn, Otis-Wilborn, & Kilgore, 2003; Mastropieri, 2001; Swanson & Murri, 2006; Whitaker, 2003).

## **Key Phases in the Development of Inclusive Education in Israel**

Over the years, the Israeli education system has undergone significant changes to promote the inclusion of SwSNs in general education. Several key phases marked this evolution, which continues today, driven by a persistent effort to implement inclusive education.

### **The First Phase: The Special Education Law (1988)**

The first phase in recognizing the rights of SwSNs was enacting the Special Education Law on July 12, 1988. The law was designed to defend the rights of SwSNs within the educational system, granting them legal protection. It reflects the commitment of the education system, as the society representative, to support SwSNs, ranging in age from 3 to 21, with a wide range of physical, mental, intellectual, or behavioral disabilities (Blass & Laor, 2002; Neon, Milshtein, & Marom, 2012). The law aimed, on the one hand, to ensure that SwSNs would benefit from tailored educational processes, treatments, and services; on the other hand, it sought to promote their integration into the general education system as equals. A key principle of the law is its prioritization of the general education system over special education (Marom, Bar-Simon Tov, Kron, & Koren, 2006). It assumes that integrating SwSNs as much as possible into general education will better prepare them for full inclusion in society (Margalit Committee, 1997; Neon, Milshtein, & Marom, 2012), as stated in the law: “The goal of special education [...] is to facilitate their inclusion into the community and the workforce” (Special Education Law, 1988, article 2). The law (1988) also expanded parental rights by granting them a more active role in decisions about their child’s placement, designing the individualized education plan, and overall involvement in the educational process.

In practice, the implementation of the law led to two major trends. The first was the shift of students with learning disabilities from separate special education schools to special education classes within general education schools. The second trend involved transitioning students from these special classes in general schools into regular classes while providing various forms of support to facilitate their successful inclusion (Blass & Laor, 2002; Margalit Committee, 2000; Marom, Bar-Simon Tov, Kron, & Koren, 2006; Neon, Milshtein, & Marom, 2012). These two trends demonstrated that, over time, the approach to inclusion was embraced philosophically and in practice within the education system. However, while students with severe difficulties continued to attend special schools, the number of special education classes within general education schools steadily increased. Transferring students from regular classes to special education classes often failed to address their needs adequately. This issue provoked professional and public opposition, as highlighted in the State Comptroller’s report (1992) which stated that the special classes within general education, to which most of the resources were allocated, represent the most significant and segregated aspect of special education within the general education system (State Comptroller, 1992). This statement underscored the growing concern that the special classes perpetuated segregation rather than fostering true inclusion.

The significant changes introduced following the implementation of the Special Education Law (1988) encountered substantial resistance, primarily from principals and teachers. A key issue that emerged was the limited hours allocated for integrating SwSNs into regular classes. Additionally, many teachers reported challenges in accommodating integrated students; they felt unprepared to teach students with disabilities and expressed concerns about their ability to provide effective instruction while managing a large classroom and adhering to a standard curriculum (Ronen, 1988). Studies conducted in Israel following the implementation of the Special Education Law enacted in 1988, found that most teachers did not support inclusion and instead favored the creation of special education classes within their schools (Reiter, Schanin, & Tirosh, 1998). Some studies indicated that when a teacher with a background in special education was appointed to regular classes, the academic achievements of the integrated students were higher than in special education classes in general schools (Moshel, 1993). Additionally, findings suggested that students with learning disabilities do not need a separate special education framework or fundamentally different instruction but supplementary support within regular education (Klingner et al., 1998). Further studies revealed that when students with physical disabilities and normal intelligence levels were integrated into regular classes, they made significant progress according to their individualized education plans and successfully achieved their designated goals (Hallahan et al., 1988; Jacklin & Lacey, 1991). All SwSNs who were surveyed stated that they preferred to study in special education classes for academic reasons, and they valued their inclusion for social reasons, as it allowed them to form friendships with peers without special needs (Klingner et al., 1998). However, conflicting findings emerged regarding the social benefits of inclusion for SwSNs in regular classes. Some studies reported successful social integration, while others found the opposite, indicating that students in inclusive settings experienced rejection and lower social status among their peers in regular classes (Margalit, 1998). These findings are significant, as normative social experiences are crucial for future societal integration, one of the key objectives stated in the Special Education Law (1988).

### **The Second Phase: The Appointment of National Committees for the Examination of the Special Education Law Implementation**

Since the enactment of the Special Education Law in 1988, the implementation of inclusive education in Israel has been continuously examined. A significant phase occurred in 1994 while developing a master plan for the law's implementation, reflecting the Ministry of Education's full commitment to Special Education (Avissar, Moshe, & Licht, 2013; Marom, Bar-Simon Tov, Kron, & Koren, 2006; Neon, Milshtein, & Marom, 2012). Later, in response to public pressure and to further assess the law's impact, two national committees were appointed by the Ministers of Education - the first, in 1997, the Margalit Committee for the Examination of the Fulfillment of Learning-Disabled Students' Potential, and the second, in 2000, the Margalit Committee for the Examination of the Special Education Law Implementation. The committees aimed to examine the challenges and the effectiveness of the law's execution. In its report (2000), the second Margalit

Committee highlighted significant discrimination and inequality in budget allocation, resources, and special education services, especially in the inclusion framework (Margalit Committee, 2000). While the Special Education Law (1988) emphasizes the priority of the placement of SwSNs in general education, with their transition to the general education framework their right to receive budgets as they have got in special education school and classes was canceled; therefore their chances of development, learning, and adaptation were compromised. The Margalit Committees (1997; 2000) significantly influenced the subsequent phase of the inclusion process within Israel's educational system.

### **The Third Phase: The Addition of the “Inclusion Amendment” to Special Education Law (2002)**

The third stage marked a crucial turning point in advancing the inclusion approach in Israel's education system. It followed the recommendations of the Margalit Committees (1997; 2000), petitions from social organizations and parents' associations, and a landmark ruling by the High Court of Justice on the issue of inclusion, reinforcing the nation's commitment to integrating SwSNs into general education and anchoring of their rights, and the services to be provided to them by law (Avisar & Bab, 2010; Avisar, Moshe, & Licht, 2013). In response, the introduction of Amendment 7(b) to the Special Education Law in 2002, known as the “Inclusion Article”, was enacted. This amendment formalized the inclusion of SwSNs in general education, ensuring their legal rights and access to essential services (Avisar, 2010; Avisar & Bab, 2010; Avisar, Moshe, & Licht, 2013; Neon, Milshtein, & Marom, 2012; Ronen, 2007).

In June 2003, the inclusion approach and the principle of the Least Restrictive Environment gained further reinforcement through the Ministry of Education's General Administration Circular (10/b), in which it was stated: “A central tenet of Israel's educational system is its commitment to providing suitable academic solutions for SwSNs who struggle to adapt to the academic and social norms of the general education framework. Efforts are made to minimize, as much as possible, the placement of these students in special education settings. It is recognized that certain SwSNs face complex, multidimensional challenges that demand comprehensive, multidisciplinary support throughout most of their school day. Only such students are directed toward special education frameworks. However, most SwSNs can thrive within regular classes through inclusion programs, benefiting both academically and socio-emotionally” (Ministry of Education, 2003).

Studies conducted in Israel, following the Special Education Law implementation in 2002 found that educators generally held positive attitudes toward inclusion (Milstein & Rivkin, 2013). However, the inclusion of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities faced the greatest resistance from school principals and teachers compared to other disabilities (Whitney & Reiter, 2006), highlighting the urgent need for specialized training for educators working with this group (Neon, Milstein, & Marom, 2011). Some educators highlighted the academic, emotional, and social progress of integrated students, emphasizing the benefits of inclusion for them and their classmates (Milstein & Rivkin, 2013; Heiman, 2004). The studies

also identified significant challenges for teachers, such as managing an increased workload, the need for additional support, concerns about classroom social dynamics, and the potential for classroom stigmatization. Teachers further highlighted difficulties stemming from the mismatch between standard curricula and the needs of integrated students, underscoring the necessity of modifying or adapting lessons accordingly (Gavish & Shimoni, 2006). Further studies have explored challenges SwSNs face in regular classes, including difficulties forming social connections with peers, feelings of dissatisfaction, social rejection, and limited personal support from classmates (Berguno, Leroux, McAinsh, & Shaikh, 2004; Heiman & Berger, 2008). Studies also revealed mixed perceptions among parents of integrated students. While some parents supported the inclusion policy, expecting it to contribute to their children's academic and social development, others questioned teachers' ability to integrate and support SwSNs effectively. Additionally, parents expressed concerns about the reactions of students without disabilities and their parents, fearing negative attitudes toward their children (Leyser & Kirk, 2004).

#### **The Fourth Phase: “Funding Follows the Child” According to “Parents’ Choice” (2009), and “The Inclusion Objective” (2012)**

The fourth phase, representing another major turning point in the approach toward the education of SwSNs in Israel, was expressed in 2009 in the recommendations of the Governmental Committee under the leadership of the retired Supreme Court Justice Dalia Dorner. The committee was established in response to the unequal distribution of funds between SwSNs attending special education frameworks and those integrated into general education. The budgetary inequality effectively denied students in special education settings the opportunity to exercise their right to be included in general education frameworks, where the available funding is significantly lower and not tailored to their needs (Dorner Committee, 2009). This inequality in resource allocation aligns with the challenges highlighted by the regular classroom teachers in the studies presented, regarding insufficient teaching resources for the proper inclusion of SwSNs in their classrooms.

The Dorner Committee proposed three groundbreaking changes. The first is that the eligibility for the type of services and their scope will be determined for each student according to his functioning characterization and not only his disability. The second proposed change is “The Parents’ Choice” model, which grants all parents of SwSNs the right to choose the educational framework—special or general education, in which their child would study. The third change introduced the “Funding Follows the Child” principle, where the funding allocated for a SwSN would be transferred to whichever school their parents selected. This principle aimed to ensure that resources directly support the student's chosen educational environment (Dorner Committee, 2009; Weissblai, 2020). The perception behind this change is that special education is not a place but a service to which the student is entitled. Its purpose is also to prevent parents from transferring their child to an inclusive education setting due to lower allocated budgets, and therefore, they prefer to place their child in a separate special education framework. The Committee

described this shift as empowering parents by giving them greater autonomy and flexibility in their children's education (Dorner Committee, 2009; Weissblai, 2020).

The Dorner Committee recommendations (2009) were not implemented immediately after publication. However, the Ministry of Education acknowledged the failures of inclusive education within the educational system. Consequently, in 2012, it introduced "The Inclusion Objective" into its strategic plan, aiming to integrate and support students within the general education system by broadening their opportunities and offering diverse support solutions (Ministry of Education, 2012). The term "students" includes those with learning disabilities, behavioral challenges, and other learning difficulties. Achieving this objective focuses on strengthening inclusion processes and expanding the range of support provided in general education, enabling as many students as possible to remain in and succeed academically. The addition of "The Inclusion Objective" reflects a commitment to embracing inclusion within the general educational framework, the expansion of responsibility for SwSNs, which was perceived in the past mainly as the province of the special education personnel, and its assimilation as a shared responsibility of the general education system (Ministry of Education, 2012).

### **The Fifth Phase: The Eleventh Amendment of Special Education Law (2018)**

Following pressure from social organizations, the State Audit Affairs Committee announced an examination into the non-implementation of the recommendations of the Dorner Committee (2009). In the State Comptroller's report published in May 2013, a special chapter was dedicated to "The Inclusion of Students with Special Needs in General Education" (State Comptroller, 2013). The report noted that, although a decade had passed since the amendment of the Special Education Law (2002) was enacted, the principle of prioritizing the inclusion of SwSNs in general education had still not been realized, while the proportion of students integrated into regular education out of the total special education population had decreased. The report emphasized that the inclusion budget in 2011 remained the same as it had been a decade before, meaning that the financial burden of inclusion continued to fall significantly on the student's parents. The State Comptroller called the Ministry of Education to examine the feasibility of the Dorner Committee's recommendations (Dorner Committee, 2009). The data analysis presented in Blass's (2022) policy paper, which referred to the development of the special education budget from 2005 to 2019 and its allocation to the various educational frameworks, can illustrate the unequal distribution of the special education budget as raised in the State Comptroller's report. The analysis reveals that during these years 55%-58% of SwSNs studied in inclusive education within general schools, while 42%-45% studied in special education schools or special education classes within general schools. However, 56% of the special education budget was allocated to special education schools and classes, whereas only 34% was directed toward inclusive education (Blass, 2022).

On 10 July 2018, the Israeli parliament approved Amendment No. 11 to the Special Education Law. The recommendations of the Dorner Committee (2009) formed the basis for the changes reflected in this amendment and redefined the special education goals. The amendment highlighted the importance of advancing

the inclusion and integration of SwSNs into general education and securing their right to equal and active participation in society across all areas of life. The law aims to provide tailored support to each student based on the type of disability, level of functioning, and the educational framework in which he is placed, to enable him to fulfill his potential and advance academically, socially, and emotionally. The amendment changes the eligibility process for special education and placement in its frameworks, enshrines the right of parents to choose the educational setting for their child, and outlines the provision of personalized and flexible services based on the student's needs and the required support. A budgetary supplement was determined for general education to strengthen, expand, and deepen the integration activities (Special Education Law, 2018; Weissblai, 2020).

The implementation of Amendment 11 of the Special Education Law (2018) has been defined as a reform and was fully implemented in 2020. The law was passed despite opposition from various educational stakeholders, including the Teachers' Union, heads of education departments in local municipalities, and academics who warned of its consequences without the necessary adjustments (Weissblai, 2020). Critics argued that the legislative changes would not improve equal opportunities for SwSNs or increase the number of integrated students. They claimed that the changes reinforce the inequality in resources between students in separate special education frameworks and the students in the inclusion framework, preventing general education from effectively and optimally accommodating integrated students. As a result, parents are not truly given a real choice between different educational settings. The Ministry of Education argued that the reform significantly increases budgets for SwSNs in special and regular education and expands the range of services available to eligible students based on their level of functioning (Weissblai, 2023).

### **The Sixth Phase: The Failure of the Eleventh Amendment and the Appointment of Shapira Committee (2023)**

The Ministry of Education's General Director's circular published in 2022 continued to strengthen the inclusion approach the education system has been leading for many years emphasizing that "the Ministry of Education's policy regarding students with disabilities prioritizes their integration into the general education framework as much as possible, while addressing their needs in a regular class or kindergarten [...]. The underlying understanding of this approach is that students with disabilities [...] can benefit from it in all aspects, including academic, social, and emotional dimensions" (Ministry of Education, 2022a). However, the 2018 reform in special education in Israel was perceived as a failure. Policymakers argue that the Special Education Law (2018) was enacted hastily, without allocating necessary and appropriate budgets and services, especially for SwSNs integrating into general education. An analysis of data obtained from the Ministry of Education supports this claim. It reflects a built-in barrier in providing the necessary services for SwSNs to be optimally integrated into general education. The data indicates that although the Ministry of Education's budget for services provided to integrated students in general education has nearly doubled since 2015, integrated students constitute most special education students, thus the allocated budget to them remains

lower than that of students in separate special education frameworks (Ministry of Education, 2022b). In 2023, only 29% of the special education budget was allocated to the inclusion framework, serving 59% of SwSNs. In contrast, 71% of the budget was directed toward separate special education frameworks, which accommodate just 41% of SwSNs. This significant disparity highlights a clear preference for investing in separate special education settings over inclusive education within the general system (Goldin, 2023). Key areas such as adequate teacher training in general schools and the recruitment of paramedical therapists and educational assistants have also not received sufficient attention, as is evident from the claims made regarding the failure of the special education reform (2018) and indicated by two reviews conducted by the Research and Information Center of the Israeli Parliament (Weissblai, 2020; 2023).

A follow-up study by the National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation (RAMA) in Israel (Raz, Wertzberger, Prei, & Skolsky, 2023) examined in 2021/22 school year the changes in the attitudes and conduct of the education system in various arenas following the enactment of Amendment 11 of the Special Education Law (2018), and the reform implemented as a result. The study revealed alarming findings about the effectiveness of the law. Findings from the 2022/2023 school year indicate that many parents who initially enrolled their children in regular classes under the “Parents’ Choice” model later sought to transfer them back to special education frameworks (Raz, Wertzberger, Prei, & Skolsky, 2023). This trend aligns with data from the Ministry of Education, which shows that in the 2020/2021 school year, 64.6% of parents who selected an inclusion framework for their child with special needs opted for a separate special education setting—either a special education school or a special education class within a general school. This percentage declined slightly to 63.3% in 2021/2022 and 59.5% in 2022/2023 (Klein & Ben Levi in Weissblai, 2023). This is set against the backdrop of the high satisfaction levels among parents of children in special education classes within general schools and special education schools across various parameters examined in the study by Raz, Wertzberger, Prei, and Skolsky (2023): teacher-student relationships, physical environment, perception of teaching, parental partnership, overall satisfaction with the school, academic and therapeutic support, satisfaction with the classroom, improvement in the child's academic and social status, and social integration.

From the educators’ point of view, the study found a significant decline in their perceptions of the benefits of SwSNs in general education from 74% in 2020/2021 to 59% in the 2021/2022 school year. In 2020/2021, 60% of general education teachers believed that inclusion provided academic benefits, while 75% thought it supported students socially. However, by 2021/2022, the academic benefits had decreased to 46% and 54% for the social benefits. Additionally, the findings show a significant decline in the willingness of educators to integrate SwSNs into regular classes. This trend is observed even in the teaching of students with disabilities who were previously accepted as manageable in regular classes, such as learning disabilities, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (AD(H)D), and physical disabilities (Raz, Wertzberger, Prei, & Skolsky, 2023). When analyzing the reasons behind this shift, it was found that 75% of the teachers believed that educators, in general, were not equipped to handle the social and emotional challenges associated with inclusion

and lacked the necessary tools to address the social and emotional challenges of the inclusion policy. 59% of educators explained that their workload prevented them from providing adequate academic support to SwSNs and addressing the challenges of differentiated instruction in general. 55% noted that the resources allocated for inclusion were insufficient to meet students' educational needs. Classroom size was also identified as a major barrier to the process. The researchers concluded that the field is signaling that it cannot accommodate the inclusion policy (Raz, Wertzberger, Prei, & Skolsky, 2023).

Considering the crisis and chaos that emerged, in 2023 a committee was appointed by the Minister of Education under the title "Education through the Lens of Special Education", to examine the issue of special education, chaired by Amos Shapira, former president of the University of Haifa in Israel and chair of the Israeli Society for Children and Adults with Autism. The committee's goal was to assess the education system concerning special education services, focusing on the challenges faced by general education in integrating and including students eligible for services, and evaluating the support provided to students entitled to special education services (Weissblai, 2023).

The published interim conclusions of the Shapira Committee expressed concern that the accelerated and unusual growth in the number of students in special education would deepen the crisis and complicate the provision of adequate resources for special education. It was later found that one of the main reasons for this sharp increase was the disappointment and frustration of parents of children with special needs, who withdrew their children from general education and returned them to separate special education. The Committee recommended expanding the professional training of teaching staff to better prepare them for the critical task of educating SwSNs in regular classes. Additionally, the committee highlighted the need for a "pyramid reversal" - a strategic focus on investing resources in early childhood education, as the first years of life are critical for a child's proper development across all domains: cognitive, emotional, social, and motor. A strategic and targeted investment in this age group will help prevent emotional, social, and learning difficulties later in life and is expected to reduce the need for special education services in schools. The committee's conclusions also indicate a need to improve teachers' working environments by significantly decreasing class sizes. Large class sizes hinder teachers' ability to provide adequate educational support to all students, especially those with special needs, and are a key factor in teachers leaving the education system (Ministry of Education, 2024). (Ministry of Education, 2024). Currently, the Israeli education system is awaiting the final recommendations of the Shapira Committee, which is expected to initiate a new phase in the inclusion of SwSNs into the educational system. The challenge in implementation will be how to utilize existing resources to transform the entire education system into a model that genuinely enables quality, effective, and inclusive education.

### **Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

The article examines the education system in the State of Israel as a case study of ongoing efforts to address, over the years, the rights of individuals with special needs in applying the principle of equality for learners. This is based on a humanistic approach that seeks the recognition and presence of diversity within the education system as part of the social system. The existing Israeli approach towards SwSNs has developed from the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 to the present day. The approach has evolved from a concept of separation to an inclusion approach, aiming to provide adequate responses to the various needs of students with disabilities, and offering a continuum of educational frameworks for their placement according to their functional level. The inclusion approach dominant in the Israeli education system means integrating SwSNs into general education frameworks as much as possible, emphasizing acceptance of diversity among all group members, both in essence and formally. The main landmarks over the years in advancing the inclusion approach include the legislation of special education laws (1988, 2002, 2018); the establishment of various committees to examine the laws' implementation and inclusion in practice (Margalit Committees, 1997 & 2000; Dorner Committee, 2007; Shapira Committee, 2023); and the examination of special education and inclusion by the State Comptroller (1992; 2013).

The first conclusion drawn from analyzing the shift from segregation to inclusion in the education of SwSNs in Israel reveals a contradiction between policy and practice. Despite the Ministry of Education's stated policy, the Special Education Law and its amendments, and declarations promoting the inclusion of SwSNs in general education, the trend is moving in the opposite direction. The number of students enrolled in separate special education frameworks is increasing, while the inclusion of SwSNs in general education is declining (Weisblai, 2023). If this trend continues, most SwSNs will eventually be placed in separate educational settings (Goldin, 2023). This trend highlights a persistent structural gap, as students in separate special education frameworks receive higher budgets and greater services than those integrated into general education. As a result, this disparity often encourages parents to place their children in separate frameworks (Ministry of Education, 2024).

Further analysis leads to the conclusion that the education system operates according to a repetitive pattern: a declaration of the desired approach to including SwSNs in general education, the enactment of a law to implement this approach, the appointment of national committees to evaluate its implementation and impact—and then the cycle repeats. As a result, despite progress in the overall perception of SwSN inclusion within Israel's education system, the recurring pattern of changes fails to drive meaningful transformation in integrating inclusive education. Consequently, similar challenges persist at each stage of the process, allowing for the potential expansion of segregated education. Moreover, the recurring pattern reflects a simplistic approach to inclusion, assuming that merely placing SwSNs in general education automatically ensures their integration. However, true inclusion is an active process that requires broad awareness and comprehensive training at all levels, involving key stakeholders such as policymakers, educators, classmates, integrated students, and parents.

At the state level, modern society is responsible for ensuring that children have optimal conditions for learning, recognizing both their needs and their right to receive meaningful education that should prepare them for future professional and social integration within their communities. Therefore, inclusive education must serve as a guiding principle for educators at all levels, reinforcing that a truly inclusive education system can only succeed when general schools are transformed into accessible, supportive, and accommodating environments for all children.

At the policymaking level, a clear message must be conveyed that inclusion is an integral and essential component of educators' roles. Policymakers must establish fundamental standards that ensure that SwSNs receive optimal learning conditions, including appropriately allocated budgets, specialized services, and the necessary support to facilitate effective inclusion. Such an approach acknowledges the unique needs of SwSNs and their right to a meaningful education that equips them for future success in the professional and social spheres. Additionally, clear criteria should be developed for building school mechanisms that foster greater inclusion (UNESCO, 2009). To drive a real change in schools' willingness to implement inclusion, policymakers must also introduce alternative assessment measures that evaluate educational efforts. These measures should assess factors, such as the school's inclusive educational approach, staff motivation, and proactive efforts to shift attitudes toward diversity (Milshtein & Rivkin, 2013).

At the school leadership level, principals must instill in teachers a mindset that perceives inclusion not as an imposed policy but as a meaningful and essential goal. School leaders play a vital role in reshaping teachers' perceptions of inclusion and establishing a strong foundation for lasting change. Creating opportunities for professional dialogue and open discussions within the school can assist educators in addressing challenges that arise during the inclusion process, heighten awareness, increase their exposure to inclusive practices, and encourage a proactive approach to fostering an inclusive learning environment.

At the class educators' level, since teachers, teaching assistants, and other educational staff members are directly responsible for integrating SwSNs, their attitudes, beliefs, and motivation significantly influence their willingness to embrace inclusion and effectively support these students. Therefore, they must transform their attitudes toward inclusion, shifting their perspective to see classroom diversity as an opportunity rather than a problem. To achieve this, they should be equipped with essential skills and resources to integrate SwSNs effectively, ensuring a supportive and inclusive educational environment. Furthermore, they must develop expertise in various disabilities, inclusive education principles, and specialized teaching methods, enabling them to adapt curricula, instructional strategies, and assessment methods to accommodate diverse learning needs. This presents a significant challenge for Israeli teacher training institutions, which must introduce a mandatory curriculum for all future general education teachers, emphasizing the inclusion and instruction of SwSNs in regular classes. Teacher training programs must also instill an understanding that inclusive education is not a choice but a necessity that requires all educators to be prepared to accommodate and support integrated students effectively.

At the parental level, to prevent unilateral transfers of integrated students to separate frameworks as possible, parents should be seen as partners. It is crucial to establish conditions that encourage the active involvement of parents of integrated students. This includes allowing them to participate in selecting the appropriate educational framework for their child, ensuring continuous information sharing about their child's progress, providing professional guidance and support to assist them in making informed decisions, and accessing relevant professionals when needed. Ensuring the sharing of information and offering professional support for parents is equally important for the parents of "regular" students in the classroom, who may have concerns or resistance to SwSNs' inclusion. Additionally, it is crucial to communicate the educational benefits of integrating SwSNs into their children's classrooms.

At the class level, students should be prepared for the inclusion of a classmate with special needs in a manner tailored to the characteristics, disabilities, and specific needs of the integrated student. This preparation should involve consultations with professionals, the integrated students' parents, and, when possible, the integrated students themselves. Discussions should focus on fostering acceptance and respect for differences, promoting equal opportunities and social justice, and exploring ways in which classmates can support the integrated student, facilitating their acceptance and integration into the peer group.

In summary, the review emphasizes that a successful transition from segregation to the effective inclusion of SwSNs in general education requires a collaborative effort from all stakeholders involved in inclusive education. Most importantly, it necessitates significant changes to long-established operational practices concerning the inclusion of SwSNs in Israel's education system, as stated by the current Israeli Education Minister Yoav Kisch: "The increasing complexity due to the rapid rise in the number of students with special needs, alongside the unsatisfactory integration rates of these children in the combined education system, requires us, with a forward-looking perspective, to make paradigm shifts in the strategic approach of the entire education system" (Ministry of Education, 2024).

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